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Higher Education Systems and Institutions, Sultanate of Oman



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HE System Development

Oman is a developing country, situated in the Middle East. It is one of the six Arab Gulf States, bordering with the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Iran. Since 1970, when His Majesty the Sultan Qaboos became the Sultan, Oman has witnessed major reform in all aspects of development. Before 1970, there were only three schools and no higher education system at all. Since then, oil and gas, as the main contributors in the Omani economy, has made the Omani government to invest heavily in education. The Omani population is around 4.5 million (2.5 Omanis, 2 expatriates), in a land area of 309,980 km².

It is important to mention that the Omani higher education system started officially with the establishment of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in 1986. Indeed, SQU is the only public university till now and regarded as the premier university carrying His Majesty's name. Before that, between 1970s and 1980s, the Omani government runs colleges that were specifically founded to give certificates in

health and teaching, serving the needs of the country from teachers and nurses at that stage of development (Carroll and Palermo 2006). In 1994, the Ministry of Higher Education was established to mark a key step in the development of the system. Furthermore, the 1990s recorded the beginning of the private higher education in Oman.

Currently there are 31 public higher education institutions (1 university, 29 colleges, 1 institutes) and 29 private institutions (8 universities, 21 colleges), together making 60 higher education institutions. More than 141 thousand students are enrolled currently in these institutions (81 thousand females, 60 thousand males). The Omani system is young in age with fast expansion and diversity in institutions and specializations (Al'Abri 2015).

Higher Education Governance

Like other systems in Oman, the higher education system is state-centric in which the government has the responsibility of steering the system though funding and administration. The mentioned 60 higher education institutions are overseen by different authorities in the Omani government such as the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Manpower, and the Ministry of Higher Education. SQU has independency in which there is the University Council in charge of its steering. Although the private institutions are privately owned, they are supervised by the Ministry of Higher Education. Table 1 shows

Higher Education Systems and Institutions, Sultanate of Oman, Table 1 The governance of the Omani higher education and number of institutions

Responsible authority	Institutions	Number of institutions	Degrees offered
Ministry of Higher Education	College of Education	1	Bachelor
	Colleges of Applied Sciences	5	Bachelor
	Private Universities and Colleges	29	Diploma, bachelor, masters
The University Council (Independent)	Sultan Qaboos University	1	Diploma, bachelor, masters, PhD
Ministry of Health	Oman College of Health Sciences	1 (8 campus around the Governorates)	Diploma, bachelor
	Higher Health Specializations Institute	1	
Ministry of Manpower	Colleges of Technology	7	Diploma, bachelor
	Vocational College for Marine Sciences	1	
	Vocational Colleges	7	
Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs	College of Shariah Sciences	1	Diploma, bachelor
Central Bank of Oman	The College of Banking and Financial Studies	1	Diploma, bachelor, masters
Royal Oman Police	The Royal Oman Police Academy	1	Bachelor
Ministry of Defense	National Defense College	1	Diploma, bachelor, masters
	Sultan Qaboos Military College	1	
	Royal Air Force Technical College	1	
	Military Technological College	1	
Total	60		

the governance relations in the Omani higher education.

As it is clear from Table 1 above, the Omani higher education system governance is scattered between different ministries and authorities. However, there is the Education Council which is considered the highest-mandated authority in the Omani government, under his Majesty and Council of Ministers, to oversee the higher education system (public & private), make its policies and assure its quality. The Education Council is affiliated. The Council is reporting to the Diwan of Royal Court, a powerful body in the Omani government directly working under His Majesty. To be that important, the Council is presided by the Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court and deputy-chaired by the Minister of Higher Education. In its membership, the Council includes the Minister of Education, Minister of

Manpower, Minister of Civil Service, Secretary General of the Supreme Council for Planning, Secretary General Research Council, Chief Executive Officer of Oman Academic Accreditation Authority, General Secretary of the Education Council, vice-chancellor of a public university, a vice-chancellor of a private university, three members of a highly academic and respected status, and two members from the private sector.

According to the mandate, the Council is responsible for making the overarching policies of the whole system, approving establishment of higher education institutions, organizing admission to higher education institutions, and proposing draft laws to the government (The Ministry of Legal Affairs 2012).

Besides, it is important to point out to two other key apparatuses in the Omani higher education system. The first is the Oman Academic

Accreditation Authority, entrusted to regulate the quality of all higher education institutions running in the Sultanate. The authority is also mandated to do institutional and program accreditation as well as developing the national qualifications framework. The second is the Higher Education Admission Center, under the Ministry of Higher Education. The Center is responsible for coordinating the enrollment of students who finish grade 12 or its equivalent in all public and private higher education institutions. The mission of the center is facilitated by an electronic system that is connected to the Ministry of Education and the higher education institutions.

Funding

As we mentioned earlier, the governance of the Omani higher education is scattered between different authorities, and therefore the expenditure on the system is not clear. Though, it is clear that the Omani government fully fund and finance the public institutions. There are no fees to enroll in these public institutions, and students get financial assistance in the form of allowances. Indeed, the government has been using the oil revenues to finance the higher education system.

Although the government does not finance the private institutions as in the case of the public ones, the government still supports them in an indirect way by land grants, tax exemptions, and scholarships (Al'Abri 2015). The government sends annually around 8,000 students to these institutions in which fees are paid by the government.

In terms of funding research, the Research Council was established in 2005 by a Royal Decree. Believing in the importance of research in the nation's development, the government has invested by funding national research projects through several funding schemes (strategic research program, open grant research program, graduate research support program, social observatory research program). The Council is aimed at achieving research excellence via building national research capacity, transferring knowledge and providing an enabling environment for innovation and research. All academics working in Omani higher education

Higher Education Systems and Institutions, Sultanate of Oman, Table 2 Number of employees according to type of work

Type of work	Number
Academics	7,447
Administrative staff	4,335
Academics with administrative positions	395
Assistant academics	41
Other jobs	4,026
Total	16,244

institutions (public or private) have the right to apply for funding their research.

Academic Profession, Students, Administrative Staff

The number of higher education institutions has increased from zero in the 1970s to reach 60. That rocky expansion has resulted in big numbers of academics and administrative staff working in these institutions. According to the National Center for Statistics and Information (2017), there were 16,244 (10,424 males, 5,820 females), described in more details in the following table. The number of Omanis was 3,681, while the rest were expatriates. Table 2 shows the number academics and administrative staff in the Omani higher education system.

According to Education Council (2017), the number of the enrolled students in the 2017/2018 academic year was 24,421. The 60% were enrolled in the public institutions, 35% were enrolled in the private institutions, and 5% were granted scholarships to study abroad. Table 3 illustrates the distribution of admitted students in the academic year 2017/2018 according to their majors (The Education Council 2017). The total number of students registered currently in all institutions is estimated 140,000 students. Around 23,000 students graduate annually.

Other Main Issues

The Omani higher education system has a rapid expansion in the number of institutions and students in a short period of time. That has

Higher Education Systems and Institutions, Sultanate of Oman, Table 3 The distribution of admitted students in the academic year 2017/2018 according to their majors

The major	Males	Females	Total	Percentage (%)
Administration and commercial studies	2,815	4,348	7,163	29.33
Engineering and technology	4,451	2,022	6,473	26.51
Society and culture	406	1,590	1,996	14.61
Natural sciences and physics	473	991	1,464	5.99
Health	293	924	1,217	4.98
Education	360	420	780	3.19
Architecture	47	226	273	1.12
Agriculture and environmental studies	199	143	342	1.40
Religion and philosophy	78	61	139	0.57
External scholarship (various majors)	35	33	68	0.28
Unspecified	16	31	47	0.19
Total	10,173	14,248	24,421	100

pushed the government to focus quality assurance, leading to the “establishment of a comprehensive system of quality assurance and quality enhancement” (Carroll and Palermo 2006). This was translated in the creation of the Accreditation Council in 2001 that was upgraded to the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority in 2010. The authority almost finished the first stage of auditing the quality of all institution, resulting in a report submitted to the institutions with commendations, recommendations, and affirmations. After 5 years of the quality audit, institutions have to undergo the assessment against the national standards, resulting in accreditation, probation, or not-accredited. Till this moment, around ten institutions went through the process. The process of accreditation is still new to the institutions.

Internationalization is considered a remarkable feature in the Omani higher education system

(Al’Abri 2016). The modes and practices of internationalizations differ from one institution to another. To illustrate, the private higher education institutions are forced to have affiliation with an international higher education institution as a requirement for founding and licensing. The public higher education institutions, as the case of Sultan Qaboos University, have decided to obtain international accreditation from well-recognized professional bodies. Currently, seven colleges at the university have been successful in gaining international accreditation. Overall, there are some global discourses of internationalizations that can be clearly noticed in Omani higher education institutions such as English as the medium of instruction, international curriculum in almost all programs across institutions, 70% of academics are international, and competing in global ranking.

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Useful Websites

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- The Higher Education Admission Center: www.heac.gov.om
- The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority: www.oaaa.gov.om
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